H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David M. Lubin. *Grand Illusions: American Art and the First World War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xii + 366 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-021861-4.

Reviewed by Shane Peterson

Published on H-War (December, 2017)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

World War I is one of America's "forgotten" wars. What happens when a person, or a nation, suppresses a traumatic event? It finds a way out. In the case of WWI, that way out, for people and the nation, may very well have been through the arts.

David Lubin's view of art and its impact on American culture would seem, at first, to compare nicely with other revisionist works, like James Fox's *British Art and the First World War, 1914-1924* (2015). Both attack the idea that the war had little impact, Fox contradicting Charles Harrison's idea that it was a "hiatus," Lubin taking on Milton W. Brown saying the "total" impact of the war on art "was not great."[1]Both cover roughly the same time frame: 1914 to 1924 for Fox, 1914 to the 1930s for Lubin. In addition, both mention the British "Vorticism" movement, Fox with a deep background, as you might expect, and Lubin with his look at American veteran Claggett Wilson's 1919 *Flower of Death* (pp. 184-185). Most striking is that both books seem to connect to the world of documentary film. Before his book, Fox offered *British Masters*, a three-part televsion series for BBC, and Lubin's work seems to all but beg to be made into a film series, with large sections suitable to be fodder for "talking heads."

As similar as the books seem, however, their goal and style are worlds apart. For Fox, art was a visible guide back to a healing, unifying world that was uniquely English. For Lubin, the war was rejected, forgotten, pushed out of sight deep into the realm of America's cultural subconscious, only to emerge across a vast spectrum of expression in the arts. This is the world of archetypes, a world very few writers dare to enter. That being the case, there are very few works to compare Lubin's to, the most striking being Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), except in this case we do not see the Hero, but the Monster. Lubin makes a case that the actor with a thousand faces, Lon Chaney, is channeling the injuries of war in the chapter "Monsters in our Midst." Other chapters deal with women, protest, masculinity, or choosing not to "see" the war at all. But it is our "Monsters," or seeing them, that is the standout treatment that the other chapters seem to build up to. Through Lubin we can see that in suppressing the war, and the combat veteran, we do the unthinkable, shattering some of the illusions of a just society or just war. With Lubin we face, through art, the responsibility for what we, as a society, have asked veterans to do. This is a powerful and pioneering work. Let it be noted that the reviewer is of the Vietnam generation, a conflict that, like WWI, was a war of attrition.

Note

[1]. James Fox, *British Art and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 134; Milton W. Brown, *American Painting: From the Armory Show to the Depression* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 76.